Transition of Islamic Discourse in Saudi Arabia: From Wahhabism to "Before 1979"

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1. Introduction

The "Arab Spring," followed by the demonstration in Tunisia at the end of 2010, with "revolution" as its theme, gradually became widespread with the ultimate aim of overthrowing the Arab monarchy of the Persian Gulf countries, that is, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially Saudi Arabia, which was its axis. In February 2011, 10 Saudis, including a university teacher, formed a group, calling themselves the "Umma Islamic Party" and demanding that the government consider them a political party. And others made a call to spark demonstration on March 11, 2010, by naming it as "the day of rage" on the web. However, the members of the party were arrested as soon as they made the declaration. And they were banned from traveling abroad, and the group was outlawed. And the "day of rage" passed with minor demonstrations.[1] As an exception among the GCC, Manama, the capital of Bahrain, saw a huge protest in February 2011 with the participation of more than 7,000 people. However, it was soon quelled when Saudi Arabia sent 1,500 troops with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the request of the Bahrain government [Matthiesen 2013: 50]. Therefore, no crucial protest occurred in GCC that could lead to the defeat of the monarchy, and Saudi Arabia succeeded in not only maintaining the regime but also making GCC the breakwater against the Arab Spring.

However, after the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia realized that the country's security was under threat and reinforced measures to prevent any such happenings in the future. One of the main reasons for this was that, although Iran, a rival Shiite axis in the region, had expanded its influence to destabilize neighboring countries such as Syria and Yemen, the expansion of political Islamism aiming to realize Islamic values in the country through democracy, as represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, and the rise of extremism in the "Islamic State" (ISIL) was a serious concern for Saudi Arabia. Since these factions belonged to the Islamic Sunni sect, same as Saudi Arabia, they rejected Saudi legitimacy as an Islamic country and could have potential mass appeal. To counter this, Saudi Arabia made efforts to prevent the infiltration of Islamism and extremism, through the rebranding the country's Islamic discourse. What this paper examines is this transition.

2. Rebranding "Official" Islam

(1) From Wahhabism to Salafism

First, a brief background to the Islamic discourse that arose in Saudi Arabia and the position of Islam in the country is presented. The dynasty in present-day Saudi Arabia is the third; its history began in 1902 when the house of Saud captured the present capital, Riyadh, following the first dynasty (1744/5-1818) and the second (1820-89). The founding ideology of the country dates to 1744, when an Islamic scholar, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-91), and a tribal leader, Muhammad ibn Saud (1687-1765, r. 1744-65),

[1] "Pro-reform Saudi activists launch political party," *Reuters*, 11 Feb. 2011, "Saudi Arabia detains founders of new activist party," *Reuters*, 20 Feb. 2011, "Saudi Arabian security forces quell 'day of rage' protests," *The Guardian*, 11 Mar. 2011.

made a religio-politico pact in Dir'iyya district, located at the Najd area in the central part of the Arabian Peninsula [DeLong-Bas 2001: 34-35]. In the pact, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab made a call for the practice of righteous Islam by banning idolatry and other polytheistic practices, establishing a country ruled by Islamic teachings, and creating a society by promoting virtue and preventing vice.[2]

Saudi Arabia's stance toward Islam can be traced to these rigid ideas of monotheism and to building a political framework and public sphere based on religion, started by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and often called "Wahhabism" (al-wahhābīya). However, Saudi Arabia has sometimes recused itself from the country's founding ideology, Wahhabism, and instead followed what they called "Salafism" (al-salafīya). Salafism means, in general, following the paths of righteous ancestors (salaf), who learned Islam directly through the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. This meant excluding the innovation not seen during the prophet's time and adopting only the holy Qur'an and the Sunna (deeds and sayings) of Prophet Muhammad as the inerrable texts of Islam. Although these ideas are common to Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia recognizes that the term "Wahhabism" is often used by others in a derogatory way, projecting a negative image of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they tried to rebrand the "official" name of the country's Islam from Wahhabism to Salafism, as can be seen in the speeches of successive kings [al-'Aql 2007: 394-395]:

> The people named us "followers of Wahhab," and call us "Wahhabist" regarding it as a specific school. However, it is a dreadful error derived from false propaganda spread by ill-willed people. We are not a group of innovators; nor are followers of innovative teaching and neither was Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab a man of innovation. Our teaching is derived from the Book of Allah and the Sunna of His messenger. It is the teaching of salaf, a legacy from the fathers. (King 'Abd al-'Aziz, 1928)

> The people say that the kingdom follows the school of Wahhab, different from the other four schools of fiqh.[3] However, Wahhabism is not a school but a reforming religious movement in an age when falsity and prejudice flourished. This movement fought against innovations and returned to the principles; it then grew beyond being just a religious movement which the kingdom followed. Despite this, we have been maligned and accused of wronghood without any evidence. (King Fahd ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, 1986)

These two speeches appealed that Saudi Arabia was disgraced by the name "Wahhabist," and that it sought to eradicate this stigma by calling the ideology as "the teaching of salaf," or Salafism[4].

(2) Government-led "Moderation and Tolerance"

This rebranding of Wahhabism as Salafism occurred during the 1950s-60s with the transition of Saudi Arabia to a "cosmopolitan Salafi world" in the context of its (a) increasing number of foreign workers and students [Commins 2015: 161-162; Farquhar 2018: 165-166], (b) economic development after the discovery of oil in 1937, and (c) newly established universities, which are strongholds today in teaching Wahhabism.[5] On the back of this domestic change, after the 1950s, the government

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2 'Promotion of virtue and prevention of vice,' often called "hisba," is a basic teaching for Saudi "religious police," whose official name is the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice [Takao 2019: 7-12].

3 "Four schools" mean four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh); Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali.

4 However, there is also an interpretation not always avoiding "Wahhabism" among religious scholars. For example, 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abdullah ibn Baz (1911-99), who was appointed as the Grand Mufti in 1993, explained "Wahhabism" as follows. ""Wahhabism" is rooted in the mission of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and reveals the nature of monotheism and polytheism … it is the obligatory on all Muslims, in following the virtues of the teachings of salaf on the method, dogma, sayings, and deeds" [Ibn Bāz 1997: 230-233]. From this explanation, there is hesitation in criticizing the use of the term "Wahhabism"; rather, he implicates the interchangeability of "Wahhabism" and "Salafism."

5 For example, Umm al-Qura University at Mecca (1949), Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud University (1953) and King Saud University (1957) at Riyadh, Islamic University of Medina at Medina (1961).

formed the country's religious establishment centered on the Committee of Senior Scholars (Hai'a Kibar al-'Ulama), which had the authority to issue Islamic legal opinions (fatwa) to form the official framework of Islam in the country [Al Atawneh 2010: 8]. Besides, newly established international organizations such as the Muslim World League (1962, Mecca) and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (1972, Jedda) became useful for Saudi scholars spread their teachings abroad. Saudi Arabia thus changed the axis of the country's Islamic discourse from Wahhabism, proper to the Saudi context, to Salafism, which Muslims across the world epistemologically could share [Hammond 2018: 154-155].

However, during the 1990s-2000s, several bombing incidents took place in Saudi Arabia, targeting governmental and US facilities [Hegghammer 2010: 203-215]. Then, 9/11 occurred, in which 15 among the 19 accused were from Saudi Arabia. This led to the Saudi government realizing the need to prevent the spread of extremism and to prove to the world that the country's Islamic discourse had nothing to do with extremism. Crown Prince 'Abdullah ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz (1924-2015, r. 2005-2015) handled the affairs of the state instead of King Fahd ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz (1923-2005, r. 1982-2005), who had been hospitalized after a stroke, and he used the country's banner of a "moderate and tolerant Islam," especially on those who had turned toward extremism, in order to guide them on the right path. This banner, was directed to achieve a certain goal by conducting activities such as ideological correction programs for the rehabilitation of the detainees of militant activities, and activities called "religious dialogue" represented by the meeting with John Pope II of the Vatican (2007). That is, the government aimed to prevent the spread of extremism within the country, and to shed country's negative image abroad.

With these events, the form of Islamic discourses took a new turn and became a political issue in which the security of the country and region played an important role. To create a "moderate and tolerant" image of the Islamic discourse became the task of mainly security and educational bodies, or the government itself, along with the princes. However, the religious establishment did not play any role except in giving legitimacy to the governmental policies through preachment, fatwa, etc. After the Arab Spring, such government's initiative regarding the formation of Islamic discourse became stronger.

3. Toward the Age of Transition

(1) Salafism Post Arab Spring

After the Arab Spring, the word "Salafism" came to be frequently used by the media and in research. The word referred mainly to the political movement of Islam represented by the "Salafist party" that emerged in Egypt and Tunisia after the political change [Cavatorta & Merone (eds.) 2016]. In addition, "Salafism" began to be associated with extremism, and by this definition, some factions confronting existing regimes in the name of Islam were called as "Salafists." Originally, both "Wahhabism" and "Salafism" had been often used in place of "extremism," to indicate "fundamentalism." However, Salafism, different from Wahhabism, is a term that could be understood by all Muslims who recognize "Salaf." Saudi Arabia aspired to use this term to project its image of a "moderate and tolerant Islam." If political Islamism, after the Arab Spring, had become firmly fixed as Salafism and penetrated the entire Muslim world, the regime of Saudi Arabia, that is the monarchy, which had been promoting Salafism, would become a contradiction. Besides, the efforts of the government from the 2000s onward toward portraying the country's "moderate and tolerant Islam" would become to be futile. Therefore, Saudi Arabia tried to extricate Salafism from the context of Islamism or extremism.

A symbolic event representing this was a conference held at Imam University, Riyadh, in December 2012, titled "Sharia's Approach to Salafism and the State's Requirement". As the guest of honor at the conference, Naif ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, the Crown Prince and the first deputy prime minister, Ministry of Interior, at the time, declared this in his opening remarks:

> Our country has followed Salafism since the pact between Muhammad ibn Saud and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, and it is the pride of Saudi Arabia even today.[6]

The conference intended "to clarify the teachings of the

Salafi movement, its righteous source and principles, and the approach of righteous Islam toward non-Muslims," and "to clarify the relationship between Salafism, the founding ideology of Saudi Arabia and its modern religious discourse and the domestic education curriculum."[7] The president of Imam University at that time, Dr. Sulaiman Aba al-Khail, declared that "all of the policies of the kingdom are based on the teachings of Salafism." In the conference, he also emphasized "that the governance of Saudi Arabia is based on true Islamic faith," and made a call to "strengthen patriotism within the country." The conference, he said, was to "remove hostility toward Islam and Salafism," "revealing the role of the kingdom in contributing to peace and stability," and "underlining that Salafism is a stance to defeat terrorism."[8]

Through such declarations, we realize that present-day Salafism in Saudi Arabia was a way to exclude hostility and violence toward the country by rebranding it as a way of countering terrorism. Aba al-Khail proclaimed that "while the world of Islam is confused by the several discourses, our country has been the mediator or custodian," and "[Salafism is] a lifestyle; its structure of Islam can be followed by Muslims across nations, and this country, undoubtedly, is following the right path of its sayings and deeds."[9] From this speech, it is clear that the Saudi side intends to maintain Salafism as its national ideology leading to the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia as an Islamic country.

The important point here is that adopting Salafism, as illustrated in this conference, was a non-political move by Saudi Arabia in rejecting political movements or militant activities, but a very political move in calling it the national ideology at the same time. In short, the idea was to maintain the legitimacy of the regime. However, considering the existing debates on whether Salafism is political or non-political [Bonnefoy 2016: 205; Meijer 2016: 219; Kuschnitzki 2016: 104-105; Wegemakers 2016: 7], such discourses continue to raise questions on the unique point of Saudi Arabia making Islam the national religion.

(2) In the Aftermath of "Saudi Vision 2030"

We now discuss how the Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia was formed after its rebranding, as mentioned above, under the reign of King Salman ibn ʻAbd al-ʻAziz (1935-, r. 2015-). During King ʻAbdullah's reign, with the majority of the population below 30 years, there was increasing empowerment of women: the government sponsored female students to study abroad, appointed a female vice minister for the first time in the country, and partially abolished single-sex education. Although these were not always in conformance with traditional values in Saudi Arabia based on Wahhabism, the government tried to maintain the stability of the regime by responding to youth and women, the majority of the population, and created an atmosphere to bring in "change" in the society.

Salman's regime initially sought to follow the conservative path with the removal of two symbolic reformist figures whom King ʻAbdullah had appointed; Nora al-Fayez, the Deputy Minister of Education, and ʻAbdullatif ibn ʻAbdullah, the president of the Committee of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (current Minister of Islamic Affaires). However, when the national project "Saudi Vision 2030" (Vision 2030) was launched in April 2016, the government became more proactive in creating "change" than the previous regime. This is because the scope of Vision 2030, an economic reform project, involves the promotion of the entertainment industry and the furthering of women's rights.[10] Hence, after 2017, the government lifted the ban on women watching football in stadiums (January 2018) and on driving cars (June 2018), besides permitting the re-opening of cinemas in Riyadh (April 2018) to hold events such as comic contests and music concerts. A new governmental body, the General Presidency for Entertainment (Hai'a al-ʻAmma li-l-Tarfih), was established in May 2016 to coordinate such events. These policies were welcomed, especially by Western countries that viewed Saudi Arabia as a conservative nation where discrimination against women was deep-rooted.

6 *al-Riyāḍ*, 20, Jan. 2012, 23.

7 *Arab News*, 28, Dec. 2011, 1, *al-Riyāḍ*, 12, Jan. 2012, 34.

8 *al-Waṭan* (Saudi Arabia), 25, Dec. 2011, 11.

9 *al-Riyāḍ*, 12, Jan. 2012, 34.

10 See the official website of Vision 2030. https://vision2030.gov.sa/

Leading this "change" in Saudi society is Muhammad ibn Salman (1985-), who became Crown Prince in June 2017. Traditionally, leading figures in the official religious establishment were opposed to these policies that would lead to "change" in society. They believed that women driving cars or going to football stadiums and cinemas would allow them to easily meet men, without being recognized. This would probably lead to the violation of Islamic teachings about sex morals.[11] Even after the launch of Vision 2030, for example, in May 2017, it was reported that 'Abd al-'Aziz ibn 'Abdullah (1943-), the Grand Mufti of the Kingdom, criticized a preacher who supported the government's stance on entertainment activities.[12] However, these opposing views toward Vision 2030 almost disappeared after June 2017. On September 27, 2017, the day after the announcement on lifting the ban on women driving, some media reported that the Committee of Senior Scholars, the axis of the religious establishment, approved this move. This was the turning point, when religious scholars chose not to oppose "change" and when Muhammad ibn Salman's initiatives for policies toward "change" were established, not the beginning of Salman's regime, the launch of Vision 2030, or the rising expectations for "change" among the youth. Later, the "change" led by the Crown Prince was heralded as for the enjoyment of the people, especially the "majority," as explained, under the control of religious scholars.

4. Islamic Discourse toward the Age of Transition

(1) "Before 1979" as a Turning Point

We now discuss Islamic discourse under Salman's regime. While Vision 2030 restricts the influence of religious scholars, it is associated with a thought control program for "strengthening the spirit of nationality" to "cultivate tolerant and moderate religious thought."[13] Perhaps the first occasion when this was referred to was in the speech of Muhammad ibn Salman delivered at the economic forum held in Riyadh, October 2017, "The Future Investment Initiative." He explained this as follows:

> We just need to go back to the state "before 1979," that is, return to a moderate and tolerant Islam (al-islam al-wasati al-mu'tadil) open to the world, to all religions and traditions, and people …. In a situation where 70 % of the population is under 30 years, frankly speaking, we should not waste time in responding to fateful ideas for the [next] 30 years. … What we must hope for is a natural life reflecting our noble religion, customs, and good traditions … Soon, I'll mop up left extremism (al-tatarruf) … Before 1979, Saudi Arabia and its surrounding areas were not as they are today. It is only after 1979 the problem of Sahwa began to spread.[14]

While this speech was cited in some domestic and foreign media,[15] it was not considered important in the context of Islamic discourse possibly because the banner for a "moderate and tolerant Islam" had already been raised by King 'Abdullah in the previous reign.

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11 *Independent*, "Saudi Arabia's top Islamic cleric says women would be 'exposed to evil' if allowed to drive," 11 Apr. 2017. From this point of view, the prominent religious figures have criticized women's driving car and entertainment facilities and events since the latter part of the 20th century. *Gulf News*, "Saudi Grand Mufti says women should not drive," 10 Apr. 2016, *Reuters*, "Saudi Arabia's religious authority says cinemas, song concerts harmful," 15 Jan. 2017, *The New Arab*, "Saudi religious authorities back women driving, contradicting years of strict opposition," 27 Sep. 2017.

12 *Gulf News*, "Scholars divided over imam's fatwa on music," 29 Jun. 2010, *Rt Question More*, "Top Saudi cleric slams preachers who approve music & singing," 31 May 2017.

13 See the official website of Vision 2030 (https://vision2030.gov.sa/). For more details focusing on the process of the project, and comparison with "Vision" of neighbor countries, see the research of P. Joyce and T. Al Rasheed [Joyce and Al Rasheed 2017: 93ff.].

14 "Muḥammad bin Salmān: sanaqḍī 'alā al-taṭarruf, sana'ūd ilā al-islām al-wasaṭī," *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 25 Oct. 2017.

15 "Crown prince says Saudis want return to moderate Islam," *BBC*, 25 Oct. 2017, "Attention: Saudi Prince in a Hurry," *The New York Times*, 7 Nov. 2017, "Saudi's Mohammed bin Salman promises return to 'moderate open Islam'," *The National*, 24 Oct. 2017.

Furthermore, as for "before 1979, there was no room for argument by the people. The year 1979 marked the birth of the Islamic Republic of Iran, an issue most important concerning the security of today's Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is only natural in the Saudi context to interpret "before 1979" as "before Iran."[16]

However, we realize that the Crown Prince Muhammad seemed to bear in mind the domestic situation, rather than the regional issue, by referring to "before 1979." Thus, he regarded "1979" as the turning point not of the region, but of the country. Understandably, "1979" was the year of the problem from within, rather than without. In the domestic context, it reminded the people of the incident of militant occupation of Haram Mosque in Mecca in November that year. The incident of Juhayman al-'Utaybi, a Saudi mastermind, demanding the abdication of King Khalid ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz (1913-82, r. 1975-82) by holding about a 1,000 people hostage shocked the Saudi people.[17] However, as this was a sporadic event, its influence was limited to the government and society after it was suppressed [Lacroix 2005: 39-40].

Madawi al-Rasheed, a Saudi anthropologist based in London, explains that 1979 was "the year when Saudi radicalization was born," with the emergence of regional issues such as the birth of Iran.[18] She then points out the problem with "moderate and tolerant Islam," such as an educational curriculum biased toward Wahhabism, the "official" religious circles not representing the voice of Sufism or Shiites, which Wahhabism finds heresy, and the legal system prohibiting the construction of religious facilities except for Islam. However, it was not other religions or sects that the Crown Prince supposed on "moderate and tolerant Islam." Another important viewpoint was explained by Nabil Mouline, a historian of Islam in Saudi Arabia, who said that "1979" was the year when the "old structures of power and authority turned out to be necessary." In other words, the period "before 1979" saw the escalation of religious establishment because "tacit alliance between the Al Saud (house of Saud) and the ulama was reactivated [Mouline 2015: 57]." This led to the possibility that "before 1979," means a rebalancing of the relationship between politics and religion in the country.[19] That means, the Crown Prince intended to again reduce of the influence of the religious bodies with the regime.

(2) Cleanup of "Sahwa" Members

Nonetheless, we cannot ignore "Sahwa," the only example the Crown Prince referred to in his explanation of "before 1979." Sahwa was the name used for a group that demanded the government to undertake political reform after the Gulf War between 1990 and 1991 [Lacroix 2010: 202-210; Freer 2018: 25, 90]. They wrote down their complaints on submitted document, asking for a stricter adaptation of Islamic rules in the country's system, independence of legislative and judicial power, advancement of 'Ulama, cleaning up corruption in governmental bodies, etc [Al-Sarhan2015:

16 In fact, such recognition was seen among the high-ranking persons around the Crown Prince, as represented by the recent speech of Khalid ibn Salman, the Vice Minister of Defense, who used the expression "before 1979" in the talk about Iran and regional security. "Khālid bin Salmān: al-Nīzām al-Īrānī yad'am al-taṭarruf wa-l-irhāb munz 1979," *al-Ḥayāt*, 25 Apr. 2019.

17 Al-'Utaybi is a member of 'Utayba, a potent tribe in the middle of Arabian Peninsula. In the early 20th century, when King 'Abd al-'Aziz was working on a mission to extend the territory of Islam, the 'Utayba tribe collaborated with him as one of main forces of the ex-legionary. However, after King 'Abd al-'Aziz began to give precedence to stable governance rather than the mission, some of the members of 'Utayba rose in revolt. This led to war, and the 'Utayba was brought down in 1929. For al-'Utaybi, therefore, the house of Saud was a subject of vengeance [Steinberg 2017: 27-28].

18 Madawi al-Rasheed, "Can the Saudi Crown Prince Transform the Kingdom?" *The New York Times*, 10 Nov. 2017. Nonetheless, there is no doubt about the importance of the year 1979 for Saudi and its regional security, because of not only the birth of Iran but also the signing of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel (March), the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (July), the militant siege of the Haram Mosque in Mecca (November), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (December). Al-Rasheed also refers to these.

19 Regarding news concerning this, see "Public Decency (dhawq al-'āmm) Law." Although the details of this are not clear yet (as of September 2019), this law was passed in April 2019, led by the Ministry of Interior. Underlying this was the fact that the Committee of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which policed people in public places on whether they followed Islamic teachings, had been restricted in its activities before and after Vision 2030, leading to an abridgment of investigative authority. The government began to show a strong tendency of leading religious issues, which were traditionally handled by religious bodies.

183-184]. The signatories of the document comprised Safar al-Hawali (1950-), a teacher of Islamic studies at the Umm al-Qura University; Salman Awda (1955-), a popular preacher in Burayda city, Qasim province; and other figures from religious, educational, and legal institutes. This meant that the people who had complaints were from various fields, despite some of them working as civil servants, and it also meant that the expansion of Islamism was not limited to the religious circles but had spread among intellectuals as well [Kéchichian 2013: 34-37]. Although not the axis of the religious establishment, they belonged to the elite in the regime. The government, cautious about being criticized from an Islamic viewpoint, tried to stop the influence of Sahwa in the country, by displacing these members from their official position, penalizing them by banning their travel abroad, and putting them under house arrest.

As Sahwa's main activities were seen in the early 1990s, there was no contradiction that there had been a time gap to pick them up from the context of "1979." It was important that this was not a sporadic event, as it led to the emergence of Osama bin Laden (1957-2011) and several bombing attacks in the country [Steinberg 2017: 30-33]. Besides, just before the speech of "before 1979" by the Crown Prince, in September 2017, dozens of people, mainly ex-members of Sahwa, were arrested together.[20] Considering this, it is possible that the Crown Prince may have indicated the existence of Sahwa in referring to "mopping up left extremism."

Furthermore, it was significant that on May 6, 2019 (the first day of Ramadan of 1440 Hijri year), on the pro-government channel's TV, "Liwan," 'Ayd al-Qarni (1960-), a Saudi scholar of Islam, appeared live on the show and referred to Sahwa. al-Qarni, who is well known even abroad for several teaching books, such as *Don't be Sad* (*La tahzan*), said that there had been a recent attempt to assassinate him in Philippines during his visit for a lecture in March 2016.[21] He is also known for being a member of Sahwa and, on the internet, he had in fact been critical of the government's policies. However, in recent years, he had maintained political silence and committed to moderate preachment on TV programs about Islam. This may be the reason why he was not taken into custody during the mass arrest of the members of Sahwa in September 2017, as described above. In May 2019, he talked about Sahwa and himself on a live TV show, attracting attention among the Saudis.[22]

> I am today supportive of the moderate Islam, open to the world, which has been called for by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman… We invite the world to come over ... our religion was sent as a mercy and safety to mankind… In the name of Al-Sahwa, I apologize to Saudi society for the mistakes that have contradicted the Qur'an and Sunnah, and contradicted the tolerance of Islam, a moderate religion.

Thus, al-Qarni repented publicly for his past anti-governmental activities and extended his support to the present leading government. The Saudi media was abuzz with voices praising his attitude.[23] Although the context of his appearance on the TV show is unclear, it is impossible that the government would not have known it, considering his career and his public persona. Rather, it is possible that the government proposed his appearance on the show for confession. Anyway, his criticism of Sahwa was mutually beneficial for him and the government. For al-Qarni, it ensured his safety in the country; the show of loyalty to the present government and appreciation was repaid by him not being put under mass arrest in September 2017. For the government, rather than by someone known to be pro-government, or non-political, this public atonement of al-Qarni, who was previously committed to anti-governmental activities, was expected to persuade citizens about the campaign for a "moderate and tolerant Islam."

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20 "Saudi clerics detained in apparent bid to silence dissent," *Reuters*, 11 Sep. 2017.

21 "Sheikh Aaidh al-Qarni, Saudi preacher, shot in Philippines," *The Guardian*, 2 Mar. 2016.

22 "Saudi cleric apologizes for 'intolerant' views of Sahwa movement," *Arab News*, 7 May 2019.

23 For example, a Saudi actor Nasil al-Qasabi referred to this. "al-Qaṣabī: 4 malā'īn qara'ū taghrīdatī…wa-'alā rumūz al-ṣaḥwa al-iqtidā' bi-l-Qarnī," '*Ukāz*, 10 May 2019. "Su'ūdīyūn: mawqif 'Āyḍ al-Qarnī shujā' wa-i'tidhār-hu qayyim," *al-'Arabīya*, 9 May 2019.

5. Conclusion

The transition of Islamic discourse in Saudi Arabia involved the rebranding of Wahhabism as Salafism to avoid the ideology being criticized as "sectarian" or "extremist." Under the reign of ex-King ʻAbdullah, the new banner of a "moderate and tolerant Islam" was introduced by the government. Presently, the term "before 1979" has succeeded the existing banner, seemed to focus on Iran, a rival country, for dealing with security issues. However, this paper observes that "before 1979" is a reflection of the domestic scene, and hence concludes by pointing out the possibility that "before 1979" is aimed at a rebalance of the religio-politico relationship. The final aim is to continue Vision 2030 by reducing the influence of the religious establishment, and to maintain stability of the regime, including that of Crown Prince Muhammad, who leads Vision 2030 and would become the next king in the natural course of events. Besides, this paper focuses more on the fact that Sahwa was referred to in the speech of "before 1979" and confirms that there was a cleanup of the remnants of Sahwa in the country. However, the external issue, such as the problem of Iran, is not completely unrelated to this banner. Rather, "before 1979" was apparently meant to work on the external menace represented by Iran, in parallel with responding to "Saudi radicalization," which, as al-Rasheed pointed out previously, was the immediate problem; in other words, the banner was to tackle both internal and external issues.

To prove this, al-Qarni mentioned, during his appearance on the TV show, that the Qatar government had approached the member of Sahwa, to offer support to the relatives of the Muslim Brotherhood.[24] To this statement, there were strong reactions from some high-ranking persons from Saudi Arabia and abroad, such as ʻAbdullatif ibn ʻAbdullah, Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah and Guidance, and Anwar Muhammad Qarqash, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. They criticized Qatar's interference in the affairs of another country, based on the words of al-Qarni.[25] The cleanup of Sahwa can be the breakthrough for the Saudi government and that of countries close to it to eliminate the menace of the Muslim Brotherhood affecting the security of the broader region.[26]

More importantly, the Saudi government decided to invite the US army into the country on July 19, 2019, for the first time in 16 years since the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. For Saudi Arabia, which needed a breakthrough in the Yemen war since March 2015 and reduce the influence of Iran in the region, the timing of this decision made great sense. On the other hand, it also reminds one of the histories of stationing the US army on the occasion of the Gulf War, which led to a stream of anti-governmental movements, of which Sahwa was the first wave. Considering this, the series of events related to Sahwa as previously explained, such as the mass arrest in September 2017, reference to Sahwa in the Crown Prince's "before 1979" speech in October, and al-Qarni's criticism of Sahwa in May 2019, might have been preparing the ground for war against any voice of protest expected by the government inviting the US army.

This comprehensive nature of "moderate and tolerant Islam" in "before 1979" corresponds to Vision 2030, covering the establishment of an economic zone, housing supply, control of religious bodies and figures, etc. Or, one must take a comprehensive view of Vision 2030, which is sometimes viewed as an economic reform plan, considering its encompassing nature, and of "before 1979" as an inevitable part of it.

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26 Against these critics, the Qatar side tends to counter Saudi Arabia by criticizing the mass arrest of Sahwa members as an abuse of human rights. "Saudi Arabia to execute three scholars after Ramadan: Report," *Aljazeera*, 22 May 2019. However, the Qatar side denied the connection itself between Sahwa and the Muslim Brotherhood. "Who are the key Sahwa figures Saudi Arabia is cracking down on?" *Aljazeera*, 5 Jun. 2019, "What is Sahwa, the Awakening movement under pressure in Saudi?" *Aljazeera*, 5 Jun. 2019.

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